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## Group says Grace settlement won't cover health needs

HELENA (AP) — A new group charged with overseeing the spending of a \$2.75 million settlement with W.R. Grace & Co. says the money will barely scratch the surface of the community's long-term health needs.

In a meeting with Gov. Judy Martz on Wednesday, members of Asbestos Health Care Project Inc. said they are looking to the state for help in finding creative ways to plan for Libby's likely massive health-care needs.

The group was formed this month to oversee how the Grace settlement money is spent. The settlement followed a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency lawsuit against Grace over asbestos cleanup in Libby.

The town has been declared one of the nation's largest environmental disasters, with widespread asbestos contamination from Grace's now defunct vermiculite mine.

The vermiculite ore used to make a variety of household products, including insulation, contained harmful tremolite asbestos.

"The folks there feel like

nobody's been held accountable," Tracy Velazquez, a Bozeman consultant working with the group, told Martz. "They feel like they shouldn't be the ones to carry the ball here."

Martz said she would commit to helping find other sources of funding for Libby's health-care needs. But she also warned the tight state budget means there likely will be little state aid for such projects.

Martz mentioned ongoing financial problems at the state Department of Public Health and Human Services, which will implement a hiring freeze April 1 to save money.

The governor also said she had doubts the state could funnel tobacco trust fund money toward Libby. Allocating the tobacco dollars to help Libby would be "a tough sell," Martz said.

Instead, she and other state health officials voiced strong support for a federal-level program that would compensate people exposed to asbestos.

She likened the idea to the black-lung compensation fund that pays coal miners disabled by working in mines.